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**THE NEW ENLISTED EVALUATION SYSTEM:
DID THE AIR FORCE GET IT CORRECT THIS TIME?**

By

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Abstract

In 2015, the Air Force unveiled a new Enlisted Evaluation System (EES) and related changes to the Enlisted Performance Report (EPR) due to consistent complaints of a “broken system”. The new EES seems thoroughly researched with a solid foundation in the Weighted Airman Promotion System, but even as it is being implemented the Air Force is finding issues that require adjustments. Air Force leadership has admitted the new system is not perfect; thus, this research examines the EES concepts and procedures using the problem/solution framework with a view on long-term effects to find potential problems. EES history, Sister-service promotion systems and an explanation of the new EES are used to support the conclusion that these changes are effective in addressing the Airmen complaints, although may cause other problems. Recommendations are derived from historical examples, Sister-service procedures, and gaps in direction that could potentially allow the system to create inequities or a perception of subjectivity.

Section I: Introduction

After years of Air Force members complaining of a “broken evaluation system” regarding the Enlisted Performance Report (EPR), Service leadership has attempted to fix it...again. The most recent problem consistently highlighted was the inflation of EPR ratings a vast number of personnel received, but the inflationary practice had become so institutionalized the Service was unable to stop it. With the commitment to correct EPR rating inflation, the Air Force also implemented changes in the Weighted Airman Promotion System (WAPS) and the Enlisted Evaluation System (EES), creating profound differences from the systems of the last 45 years. Some may laud the changes while others will find difficulty meeting the new standards.

As this transition takes place, there seems to be more questions than answers driven by apparently complex timeframes and processes caused by the implementation being planned and executed in stages. This is to maintain time lines matching testing windows, release of new EPR forms, and coordination of new EPR Static Closeout Dates (SCOD). In total, the projected execution schedule (subject to change) spans from December 2014 to March 2016 (Figure 1). When the Air Force Reserve and National Guard are included, the implementation time frame extends to 30 months due to Reserve and Guard biennial reporting requirements.¹ Next, with the entire evaluation system affected, multiple personnel actions must change, requiring a comprehensive education process. Last, terms used are new or involve different processes, such as the stratification of Senior Non-commissioned Officers (SNCOs) or the Forced Distribution of Airmen and Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs). What many initially expected to be just a new EPR form has instead evolved to encompass nearly every facet of the promotion system.

Figure 1: Projected Execution Schedule ²

Enlisted Evaluation System (EES) and Weighted Airman Promotion System (WAPS) Projected Execution Schedule (RegAF) Subject to Change						
ENLISTED EVALUATIONS MILESTONES	SrA & Below	SSgt	TSgt	MSgt	SMSgt	CMSgt
CRO Elimination (note 1)	2 Dec 14	4 Oct 14	15 Aug 14	3 Jun 15	3 Apr 15	2 Feb 15
Established Static Closeout Date (SCOD)	31 Mar	31 Jan	30 Nov	30 Sep	31 Jul	31 May
New EPR Form/Guidance Released (note 2/3)	~Aug 15	~Aug 15	~Aug 15	~Apr 15	~Apr 15	~Feb 15
Stratification Restrictions	N/A	N/A	N/A	~Apr 15	~Apr 15	N/A
Forced Distribution	~Mar 16	~Jan 16	~Nov 15	N/A	N/A	N/A
ENLISTED PROMOTIONS (WAPS) MILESTONES	SrA & Below	SSgt	TSgt	MSgt	SMSgt	CMSgt
WAPS Testing Window	N/A	May-Jun	Feb-Mar	Feb-Mar	Dec	Sep
Evaluation Boards	N/A	N/A	N/A	TBA	Jan-Feb	Oct
Change from Last 5 yrs to last 3 most recent EPRs	N/A	CY15 Cycle	CY15 Cycle	CY15 Cycle	N/A	N/A
PECD	N/A	31 Mar	31 Jan	30 Nov	30 Sep	31 Jul
First Incremental TIS/TIG reduction	N/A	CY15 Cycle	CY15 Cycle	CY15 Cycle	CY16 Cycle	CY15 Cycle
Change EPR Calculation Weight	N/A	CY15 Cycle	CY15 Cycle	CY15 Cycle	N/A	N/A

NOTES:

1. No further CRO evaluations will be processed on or after this date
2. New EPR Forms will be released for CMSgt, SNCOs, and Junior Enlisted Airmen. For SNCOs, the new form will be followed by guidance on stratification and final endorsement restrictions. For Junior Enlisted Airmen, the new form will be followed by guidance on forced distribution for unit commanders.
3. TSgts and below will receive an EPR on the current form upon the initial SCOD establishment. MSgts thru CMSgts will receive an EPR on the new form upon the initial SCOD establishment.

Stemming from complaints of inflated EPR ratings, this update is the largest evaluation system change in over 45 years,³ enacting unanticipated system-wide adjustments with implications felt at every level of the organization. The Air Force built the product with the intention for it to be equitable, explainable and executable and each one of these comes with its own set of conditions.⁴ Air Force personnel must understand these conditions to make it work as intended, but just as important is to ensure the system maintains its integrity even if those conditions need to change. Compromise is always required with change and this EPR/EES is no different. By understanding the processes and how they relate between the past and present, supervisors and commanders will be prepared to manage everybody's expectations.

To educate and prepare the force on the new EES, Air Force Headquarters (HAF) and the Air Force Personnel Center (AFPC) conducted an EES Roadshow consisting of a one-hour brief followed by a question and answer session. The Roadshow brief was posted on the Air Force's MyPers Portal as reference along with a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) sheet to answer highlighted concerns. Multiple HAF/AFPC Roadshow Briefs, leadership interviews and military-specific magazine articles relating to the impacts of the new EPR, EES and WAPS have been accomplished. Unfortunately, these do not answer all concerns or reference every problem confronted at the unit level because many of these questions will only be answered with time and experience. It is also important to understand the transition to the new EPR and EES is taking place concurrently to this research, thus the implementation process will not be addressed because interim changes and guidance are still being disseminated.

This research will use the problem/solution methodology to describe why the current system needed to change, the effects of the new systems in an effort to find strengths and weaknesses, and then provide suggestions for reducing long-term negative impacts. An explanation of the EES history, previous evaluation systems and an overview of Sister-service promotion systems will provide a comparison for finding these strengths and weaknesses, which will support recommendations for effectiveness and sustainability of this latest iteration of the EES.

Section II: Background

The Symptom: A Broken EPR

EPR Ratings: Regarding the current EPR data, 91% of all personnel received ratings of “truly among the best” or “5” on their annual EPRs,⁵ up from 83% in 2011.⁶ This fact alone proved the ratings were inflated on a systemic level providing an ineffective measurement toward promotion in the Weighted Airman Promotion System (WAPS) scoring model. Although the EPR is only one piece of the scoring, it was the cause of many complaints because the only way to fix it was a Service-wide realignment, previously done in 1990. Any attempt made to correct the system at the local level, rating even as high as a “4,” would reduce the member’s promotion chances as nearly all others in the cycle received a “5,” awarding the highest EPR points.⁷ In the old system, five EPR ratings would calculate WAPS promotion points and a single “4” would reduce the total score seven points; a single “3” would reduce it by 14;⁸ significant percentages of the 135 available EPR score points.

EPR Form: The actual form contributed to some of the dissatisfaction. First, there were a daunting 15 - 20 bullets required depending on rank, and while this presumably provided a more detailed “picture” of the member it significantly increased the difficulty in completing comprehensive and impactful bullets expected to support the “5” being advertised. Writing guidance also varied throughout the Service with the format and content being changed with the leadership; one might allow a two-segment bullet while others would have no less than three bullets with a semicolon and dash-dash between.⁹ These variations, coupled with limited line length turned accomplishing an EPR into a creative writing exercise versus providing an accurate picture of the Airman’s performance.¹⁰ These differences often created very unit or AFSC-specific writing variations to EPRs, which were ultimately placed into an Air Force-wide system.

The Problem: A Broken System

Multiple influences affected the evolution of the EPR and promotion processes: problems with feedback, leadership, EPR focus and training all created a cumulative effect removing checks and balances and created a formality of inflated ratings.

Feedback: As the Air Force examined the inflation problem; performance feedback worksheets had little congruity with the EPR, making it difficult for supervisors to equate feedback sessions with their subordinate's annual evaluation. Air Force Evaluations and Recognition Programs Branch deemed feedback forms too supervisor-driven without a means for Airmen to assess themselves during the sessions, essentially making it a one-way conversation versus a relationship-building activity.¹¹ In early 2012, the Air Force tested the new Airman Comprehensive Assessment (ACA) in an effort to build more effective communication, and the new form was implemented on 1 July 2014 Air Force-wide.¹² The importance placed on effective feedback has led Air Force leadership to identifying the ACA as the cornerstone of the new EES.¹³

Mentorship: In a related manner, the Air Force Mentorship Program directed by Air Force Instruction (AFI) 36 – 2643, *Air Force Mentorship Program*, was implemented ineffectively.¹⁴ The intent of the mentorship program is to support total force development by creating an environment promoting personal and professional growth, increasing the organization and mission familiarization, assist in retaining Airmen while increasing competencies, and act as a catalyst to leverage knowledge.¹⁵ The mentorship program was also expected to create engagement between subordinate and supervisor; as a concept AFI 36-2643 builds a foundation but lacked depth and influence, clearly evident when compared to the other Services.

AFI 36-2643 is only 19-pages in length and is written with general guidance for a mentor's needs versus both mentor and mentee. In comparison, the 149-page Navy Marine Corps Directive (NAVMC DIR) 1500.58, *US Marine Corp (USMC) Mentoring Program Guidebook*, gives very explicit guidance to the mentor and support references for the mentee.¹⁶ The US Army (USA) Mentorship guide (although only 39 pages) provides far better direction than AFI 36-2643,¹⁷ and the US Coast Guard uses Open-Mentoring, a professionally-developed program guiding both mentors and mentees. In 2008, the Air Force Audit Agency found 44% of Airmen did not know the program existed and 54% had not been a mentor or mentee.¹⁸ This lack of emphasis on the program and a feedback process reduced the effectiveness of the relationship between the subordinate and supervisor, negatively affecting the evaluation system.

“Whole Person” concept: As the EPR ratings became a standard of “5,” standing out among peers became more difficult, thus the “whole-person” concept provided a way to show growth and involvement. Engagement in community activities has been and will always be encouraged, but this activity soon became awarded criteria on evaluations.¹⁹ In a 2008 commentary by CMSgt Halvorson of the 60th Air Mobility Wing, he wrote, “We all know how important it is to show a willingness to be team players, to play a role in advancing the goals of charitable groups and activities, and to promote personal and professional growth, and development through any number of educational programs and venues. Additionally, most of us realize how critical this subject can become when it comes time for annual evaluations or an award submission.”²⁰

For supervisors, these activities became a specific, tangible action to support their subordinates’ increased rating, especially effective when EPRs looked similar. Activities outside of work became a valuable factor in differentiating between members’ performance, and

although volunteering was never overt performance criteria, expectations demanded it.

Training: With an ineffective supervisor/subordinate relationship and the use of non performance-related activities removing emphasis from performance, training also influenced the inflation. Air Force Professional Military Education (PME), as one training venue, often cannot instruct Airmen and NCOs as their units actually operate. This is not to say Airman Leadership School (ALS), Non-Commissioned Officer Academy (NCOA), and even Air and Space Basic Course (before closing) or Squadron Officer School teach incorrectly; just the opposite. PME teaches the same AFI standards, but Airmen who just got “re-blued” could not change unit standards that evolved through decades.²¹ As a simple example, AFI 36-2406, *Officer and Enlisted Evaluation Systems*, states, “white space is authorized” on performance bullet statements and taught that way;²² however, unit leadership seldom allowed it unless it was to downgrade the member.²³ In the same manner, PME instructs students to rate a subordinate’s performance honestly; obviously different than the reality of local unit standards shown by the overabundance of “5”s. Although PME did not create or fix the problem, it helped increase awareness of it.

Potential: In a 2008 RAND report on WAPS, Air Force Policy Directive (AFPD) 36-25, *Military Promotion and Demotion*, deemed ‘potential’ as the fundamental principle governing enlisted promotions. The directive stated, “The Air Force must be able to identify those people with the highest potential to fill positions of increased grade and responsibility,” and the report showed this as a significant issue in the lack of EES standardization.²⁴ One of the biggest problems was the lack of definition for “highest potential,” causing difficulty in implementing any standard. On the EPR, “push lines” or supervisor promotion recommendations proved an Airman’s readiness for more responsibility, and would reflect this potential instead of the

previous rating period's accomplishments.²⁵ On the EPR, one or two push lines would tout promotion readiness as a formality even when the Airman was not promotion-eligible because this would support a high rating and be referenced in upcoming promotion cycles. As five EPRs calculated the WAPS score, importance was placed on making every EPR as strong as possible.

Change of Reporting Official: Potential long-term problems were created through unintended capabilities, or loopholes, in the system. Per AFI 36-2406, a Change of Reporting Official (CRO) mandated an evaluation after a 120-day period of supervision, but this was used in other manners. If a member received a “3” or “4” on an EPR, it could be buried with only a few CROs.²⁶ This process could also hide actions by accomplishing a CRO prior to the 120-day mark having a less-biased supervisor write the annual evaluation; “CRO-Jockeying” or “two-stepping” are unofficial terms for this.²⁷ This caused short-term problems by surprising supervisors from system processes to produce an unanticipated EPR – an annual EPR due with less than 120 days supervision or a short-term EPR based on a quick rater change at just over 120 days. As the member increased in rank, promotion board EPR reviews would show irregularities raising questions as to the score validity.

Leadership protection: Supervisors and unit leadership also played a crucial role in the inflation. By design, the EPR documents performance and rates an individual’s preparedness to take on more responsibility, but high EPR ratings created a tool that (at best) marginalized promotion competition or (at worst) provided punishment.²⁸ Very few raters, from newly promoted supervisors up to commanders, found themselves willing to change the status quo. To mark an EPR lower than a “5” often required justification to unit leadership because it would negatively affect the Airmen’s career, and a lower rating without significant validation had long-term promotion implications.²⁹ Over time, loss of faith in the evaluation system produced an

environment fostering a protection mechanism where checks and balances would normally be placed. This changed only if the subordinate failed to meet standards that officially required downgrades or a referral EPR.

As EPR inflation eventually permeated the Service, complaints increased with the inflation percentages; the problem needed fixing. The Air Force used the increased level of dissatisfaction as impetus for the changes, yet the announcement of the new EPR and associated EES changes brought more speculation than excitement.³⁰ Younger members approached the new system with apprehension, and older members and retirees recalled experiences or past problems from 25 years and beyond. Very few fully understood past inefficiencies or the effectiveness of coming changes.

Section III: History of EES

A review of the EES early history shows dissatisfaction at all ranks over a significant amount of time. The system, although inequitable at the time, was due to inefficient processes in attempts to correct complex manning problems. Unfortunately, maintaining Airman satisfaction while fixing these manning problems was made more difficult due to an inability to explain the processes.³¹ In short, units were overmanned in higher ranks, at a low skill level and with little time in the Service. This increased the time Airmen could remain in the military, but the manning allocations provided little growth opportunity because each rank confronted the same problem. Compounding the problem, most military members stayed in one place exacerbating the lack of allocations and increased stagnation. Member dissatisfaction spurred quota systems, centralized the promotion system and created promotion boards, eventually developing the Weighted Airman Promotion System in use today.

Distinct phases through the first years of the Air Force demonstrate attempts at skill level and manning stabilization through many system adjustments. With continually changing requirements, such as the Korean Conflict and disagreements between Major Commands, some decisions worked while others did not, and the Air Force was harshly reactive to unforeseen manning problems too complex for single corrective actions. In the same manner, many look at the problem of today's EPR inflation as a single-faceted issue, but corrections required the Air Force to take a comprehensive approach by addressing other EES problems. An overview of the EES history and the distinct phases the EES transitioned through should provide better understanding.

Transition from Army to Air Force (1947 – 1953)

Unit authority and Time in Service: The initial transition from the Army to the Air Force created understandable controversy that needed time for effective organization. Not only did personnel need to transition to an entirely new Service, the wartime stance changed to peacetime. The inception of the Air Force after World War II provided a place for specially trained NCOs looking for a future in the military, but many promoted quickly during the war while having spent only a short time in the Service. With a large number of these personnel transferring to the Air Force in 1947, the Service quickly became rank-heavy, creating stagnation and causing promotion difficulty for new enlistees. During this time, the Air Force gave commanders promotion authority to fill limited vacancies, creating a highly subjective system, referred to as “the first sergeant’s black book” or commander’s “favorite son.”³²

By 1949, only two years after inception and with a stalled promotion system, the Air Force implemented two actions to increase promotions. First, the Air Force allocated over 2,200 E-6 and E-7 billets for growth into the NCO ranks. Second, a Time In Service (TIS) promotion to the rank of E-3 removed the requirement for a vacant promotion allocation; both actions increased the maximum allocation ceilings. In 1950, the Korean War justified the complete removal of the ceiling, promotion opportunity became nearly unlimited, and the Service nearly doubled in size. At the end of the conflict, only three years later, the Air Force immediately faced a two-fold problem - excessive manning promoted through the war along with an increased use of contractors for maintenance and support. This created the problem commonly known as the “Korean Hump,”³³ forcing the Air Force to drop allocation ceilings once again.

Transition from decentralized to centralized control (1953 – 1968)

Command authority, Quotas and Time In Grade: The manning imbalance caused by the wartime promotions forced USAF Headquarters (HAF) to implement a quota system for Airmen promoted above E-2. The Director of Military Personnel controlled allocations, provided them to Major Commands, and then those Commands delegated positions to unit commanders. Additionally, a minimum Time in Grade (TIG) became a requirement for promotion at all ranks. Last, Major Commands acquired promotion authority to ranks E-5, E-6 and E-7 as an increased measure of control.³⁴ This slowed the number of promotions above E-4, but had a secondary effect of highlighting Air Force Specialty (AFS) promotion inequities between Major Commands. Promotion allocations were spread evenly between Commands giving more demanding missions more personnel, reducing open promotion allocations. Promotion potential worked opposite for less important missions – fewer personnel meant more promotion opportunity. Attrition from lack of allocations reduced manning and slowly balanced portions of the force but caused significant dissatisfaction within the ranks.

Supergrades, promotion boards and centralization: By 1958, allocation shortages, dissatisfaction, and congressional approval justified the addition of senior enlisted ranks at E-8 and E-9 (supergrades).³⁵ These ranks provided growth potential, helped delineate responsibility and provided appropriate pay based on those responsibilities. The Air Force allocated Senior NCO quotas by Air Force Specialty Codes (AFSC) to ensure all career fields received sufficient leadership and promotion authority was at the unit level; however, effects of the “hump” still plagued the Service. Air Force manpower validation teams found the ranks between E-4 and E-7 still 20% overmanned,³⁶ thus TIG was increased again to slow promotions and promotion

authority for E-8 and E-9 increased to the wing level in another attempt to stabilize the persistent rank imbalance.

Between the years 1960 and 1967, the Service saw consistent system manipulation to refine the promotion process and balance the rank structure. Some of the more significant adjustments started with HAF requiring that Major Commands submit promotion reports, ensuring oversight. Soon after, HAF instituted a supervisory examination for E-8 or E-9 and in 1961 a minimum skill level for promotion to all ranks. In 1962 a Promotion Distribution List (PDL) was used to identify promotion opportunities based on AFSC, and in 1964 the Department of Defense extended the allocation ceilings and factored the ranks of E-8 and E-9 into total promotion allotments. Still seeing an imbalance, the Air Force managed E-4 through E-7 quotas with a Promotion Management List (PML) based on AFSC from each major command to prevent promotions above authorized allocations. Centralizing this information showed some AFSCs with unlimited promotion opportunities while others were nearly frozen.³⁷ The Air Force looked at a centralized promotion system, but there was enough dissention from Major Commands to prevent it. One notable reason for dissention was the assumption Service-wide competition would cause performance report inflation to provide advantages.

With the sustained decentralized promotion system through 1967, small changes continued until The World-Wide Airman Promotion Workshop. E-8 and E-9 boards just competed across the Service instead of within their command and the favorable results proved probable success for lower ranks. The Workshop developed a monthly promotion plan, allowing promotions to fill vacancies in a more sustained manner, changing to twelve from a maximum of three times per year providing a more consistent annual promotion rate. Airmen were still unsatisfied because non-standard evaluation criteria between Commands led to potentially

unequal promotion decisions. The Air Force developed and implemented a “whole man” concept to standardize board promotion methods.³⁸ A three-judge panel scored each package using a 10-point scale on ½-point increments. If the three scores varied by more than two points, another panel or the board president would score the package. Points added up to a maximum of 30 and the board promoted those with the highest score based on the PML quota allocations. Personnel now competing across Major Commands forced questions about board standardization – the process was standardized, but not the scoring – and Airmen still perceived allocation problems and lack of opportunity. Finally, the system lacked a feedback process to instruct the Airman how to do better on the next promotion cycle.

Development of WAPS and TOPCAP (1968 – 1980)

Weighted Airman Promotion System: Airmen complaints generated so much pressure on Air Force and Congressional leadership by 1967 that a congressional subcommittee, in conjunction with an Air Force internal promotion system review, performed an evaluation to determine if the complaints were valid and warranted change. The congressional findings showed a lack of objectivity, board standardization problems and scoring irregularities.

Three findings should be of particular interest:

The selection procedure required the subjective judgment of individual board members. Thus, resulting at times in *overemphasis of peripheral factors such as outside education and community activities*.

The principle tool in the whole man determination, the Airman Performance Report (APR), *was subject to inflation and had become an inadequate device to measure potential among a group of qualified candidates*.

Inadequate use of technical testing resulted in *insufficient emphasis on technical knowledge*. The enlisted man was only required to take a skill knowledge test once for every two pay grades.³⁹

The Air Force Human Resources Laboratory (AFHRL) facilitated the development of a new system designated the Weighted Airman Promotion System (WAPS) using standardized tests, performance reports, TIS, TIG, and decorations as criteria (Figure 2). Although approved for implementation in 1968, it was initially tested against the board's "whole man" concept for two full years before becoming fully operational. The Alaskan Air Command tested the product with and without the board score resulting in 97 – 98% correlation.⁴⁰ Removing the board score affected outcomes only slightly, but reduced time and administration significantly – it was then implemented for ranks E-4 through E-7 in 1970. A separate 1970 study found this system was incompatible with the E-8 and E-9 ranks, thus implementing it later.⁴¹ Under WAPS, HAF aligned promotions and prioritized by grade, AFSC and a total weighted factor score. HAF also published a promotion priority list based on the highest scores in each AFSC selected to fill forecasted vacancies.⁴² Publishing WAPS scores addressed transparency and feedback concerns, yet some Airmen felt competing service-wide, not just within AFSC, would provide a more equal opportunity.

Figure 2: 1970 WAPS Scoring Criteria⁴³

WEIGHTS AND FACTORS USED IN WAPS	
Factors	Weights
Specialty Knowledge Test (SKT) score	100
Promotion Fitness Examination (PFE) score	100
Time-In-Service (TIS)	40
Time-In-Grade (TIG)	60
Decorations	25
Airman Performance Reports (APR)	135
TOTAL	460

With the implementation of WAPS, Major Kustelski, Chief of the Air Force Promotion Management Branch, said of the new program: "We have come a long way since the days of the first sergeant's 'Black Book.' We now have a system that is promoting the best."⁴⁴

TOPCAP, Equal Selection, BTZ and STEP

In 1972, the Air Force developed and implemented the Total Objective Plan for Career Airmen Personnel (TOPCAP) as a long-term planning tool. Functioning to build a stable force for peacetime and mobilization requirements while finding ways to enlist and maintain the best personnel available, TOPCAP addressed one of the last promotion system criticisms – quota imbalances – with Equal Selection. This process removed the PML and gave each AFSC an equal percentage of the total promotion quota, providing the same promotion opportunity across the Service.⁴⁵ Next, promotion to E-4 became based only on TIS, TIG and minimum qualification in AFSC, removing the grade from WAPS requirements. Later, the WAPS scoring chart and rounding methods were changed to remove inequities. The original methods rounded up or down to the nearest whole percentage point, but this change rounded scores to two decimal places. WAPS points now totaled 460 with fair rounding methods and, once accomplished, negative correspondence regarding the promotion system dropped significantly.

Three more noteworthy changes happened with TOPCAP. To reward outstanding service and performance, HAF instituted Below the Zone (BTZ) promotions to E-4 and, although a challenging process, was well liked. BTZ nomination required Airmen to prove themselves as exceptional, created competition between Airmen, equated promotion potential with performance, and provided the commander a role in the decision. Soon after, the Air Force placed SNCOS under WAPS using the USAF Supervisory Examination instead of the Specialty Knowledge Test (SKT), although SNCOS still underwent a selection board. Also, in 1980, the Air Force implemented Stripes for Exceptional Performers (STEP) to recognizing promotion potential while accommodating unique circumstances in personnel E-5 through E-7.⁴⁶

Movement away from TOPCAP to the EES of today (1980 – present)

The promotion system changed little in the last 25 years, but the early years witnessed tremendous turmoil. Young Airmen and NCOs entering the Air Force in the late 1940s and early 1950s found themselves on the proverbial “wild ride” through most, or all, of their career. Countless adjustments, with successes and failures, brought the Air Force to the current EES now requiring more change. The current system’s strengths are based on the trial and error of those crucial thirty years and, with the implementation to the new system, small adjustments and criticisms should be expected.

The dissatisfaction causing the latest change was specific toward EPR inflation, but the EES had problems not obvious or understood by most Airmen. The comprehensive change sparked a significant level of criticism, much of it potentially unwarranted. To provide better understanding of the Air Force EES, a brief overview of Sister-service procedures shows significant differences, although some similarities.

Section IV: Sister-service Evaluations

US Marine Corps

Promotion system: The US Marine Corps promotion system uses a web-based system called Automated Performance Evaluation System (A-PES) that manages the evaluation process and maintains all documentation and Fitness Reports (FITREP). Marines account for every day on their FITREP and the supervisor accomplishes a report at significant events, such as a PCS by the Marine or their OIC, annual evaluation close out date, and long-term Temporary Duty Assignments. The evaluations support promotion potential, which happens one of two ways. Up to E-4, the Marine must meet TIS, TIG and required PME who are then graded by their supervisors for the commander's promotion recommendation. E-5 and above must meet the same requirements and then compete at a board.

The promotion board consists of up to 21 judges convened at Quantico, VA and look at every promotion-eligible Marine E-5 and up. Board members provide a synopsis of each Marine's entire career to all others for two minutes using the Marine's latest picture and all evaluations. The board then selects the "best qualified" for promotion in each specialty with knowledge of allocated positions. If there are fewer allocations than promotable Marines the board conducts another review to remove the least eligible. The Marine Corps considers PME and education very important, and the board often removes Marines for this determining factor.⁴⁷ Once complete, seniority determines promotion sequence numbers – the Marine with the most seniority will promote first.

Promotion Recommendations: Promotion recommendations come from the Marine's OIC/RO, and is subjective in nature based on the Marine's performance. The supervisor

provides promotion and retention recommendations and forwards to the RO who completes the Reviewing Officer Comments and fills out the Comparative Assessment “Christmas Tree” (Figure 3). This diagram provides every rating the RO has ever given, assisting boards by showing RO evaluation trends and a direct comparison to all other Marines rated. In the example below, if the “Qualified Marine” square had a “12,” it means the RO has given a total of 12 Marines that rating throughout his or her career. The RO then includes comments with promotion and retention recommendations for board consideration.

Figure 3: USMC FITREP Reviewing Officer Comments⁴⁸

K. REVIEWING OFFICER COMMENTS																			
1. OBSERVATION:	<input type="checkbox"/> Sufficient <input type="checkbox"/> Insufficient																		
2. EVALUATION:	<input type="checkbox"/> Concur <input type="checkbox"/> Do Not Concur																		
3. COMPARATIVE ASSESSMENT: Provide a comparative assessment of potential by placing an "X" in the appropriate box. In marking the comparison, consider all Marines of this grade whose professional abilities are known to you personally.	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>DESCRIPTION</th> <th>CHECKBOX</th> <th>COMPARATIVE ASSESSMENT</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>THE EMINENTLY QUALIFIED MARINE</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>ONE OF THE FEW EXCEPTIONALLY QUALIFIED MARINES</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>ONE OF THE MANY HIGHLY QUALIFIED PROFESSIONALS WHO FORM THE MAJORITY OF THIS GRADE</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>A QUALIFIED MARINE</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>UNSATISFACTORY</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> <td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	DESCRIPTION	CHECKBOX	COMPARATIVE ASSESSMENT	THE EMINENTLY QUALIFIED MARINE	<input type="checkbox"/>		ONE OF THE FEW EXCEPTIONALLY QUALIFIED MARINES	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>		ONE OF THE MANY HIGHLY QUALIFIED PROFESSIONALS WHO FORM THE MAJORITY OF THIS GRADE	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>		A QUALIFIED MARINE	<input type="checkbox"/>		UNSATISFACTORY	<input type="checkbox"/>	
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A QUALIFIED MARINE	<input type="checkbox"/>																		
UNSATISFACTORY	<input type="checkbox"/>																		
4. REVIEWING OFFICER COMMENTS: Amplify your comparative assessment mark; evaluate potential for continued professional development to include: promotion, command, assignment, resident PME, and retention; and put Reporting Senior marks and comments in perspective.																			

Evaluation Forms: The Marine Corps uses two forms to evaluate personnel – E-1 through E-4 use an Evaluation Report & Counseling Record form where E-5 and above use the Fitness Report (FITREP). The first thing rater's see on the form is Commandant's Guidance to not inflate the Marine's rating (Figure 4). The FITREP is a very comprehensive six-page form with a large emphasis on weapons qualification and physical/combat fitness – every Marine is a rifleman and needs to be physically able to do the job (Figure 5). Each Marine completes a Marine Reported On Worksheet (MROW) through A-PES, providing their accomplishments and

performance for that rating period, and then the supervisor validates the information on the FITREP for RO support. The supervisor also completes the rest of the six-page Directed Comments sections where character, leadership communication, and other criteria are evaluated from “A” to “H;” “A” is poorest where “G” is highest rating and “H” is Not Observed. For reference, Marines internally consider those who get “F” or “G” markings as “water-walkers,” and the supervisor/RO must justify the high rating.

Figure 4: USMC FITREP Commandant’s Guidance⁴⁹

USMC FITNESS REPORT (1610) NAVMC 10835 (Rev. 7-11) (EF) PREVIOUS EDITIONS WILL NOT BE USED FOUO - Privacy sensitive when filled in.		COMMANDANT'S GUIDANCE		DO NOT STAPLE THIS FORM
<p>The completed fitness report is the most important information component in manpower management. It is the primary means of evaluating a Marine's performance and is the Commandant's primary tool for the selection of personnel for promotion, augmentation, resident schooling, command, and duty assignments. Therefore, the completion of this report is one of an officer's most critical responsibilities. Inherent in this duty is the commitment of each Reporting Senior and Reviewing Officer to ensure the integrity of the system by giving close attention to accurate marking and timely reporting. Every officer serves a role in the scrupulous maintenance of this evaluation system, ultimately important to both the individual and the Marine Corps. Inflationary markings only serve to dilute the actual value of each report. Reviewing Officers will not concur with inflated reports.</p>				

Figure 5: USMC FITREP Rifle and Physical Fitness⁵⁰

8. Special Information:				9. Duty Preference:			
a. QUAL	NN	d. HT(in.)	67	g. Reserve Component	N/A	a. Code	b. Descriptive Title
b. PFT	271	e. WT	165	h. Status	M	1st	1CM MAINT CO, CLB 351, CLR 35
c. CFT	NREQ	f. Body Fat		i. Future Use	N/A	2nd	15H MAINT CO, CLB 251, CLR 25
10. Reporting Senior:				3rd			
a. Last Name		b. Initc. Service		d. SSN		e. Grade f. Duty Assignment	

US Army

Promotion system: The Army uses a mix of decentralized (E-2 to E-4), semi-centralized (E-5 to E-6), and centralized (E-7 to E-9) systems. Up to E-4, unit commanders are given the authority for promotion based on TIG/TIS. E-5 through E-6 uses a semi-centralized system where promotion eligible (and recommended) soldiers with required PME, TIS and TIG have their package administratively scored, and then physically meet a board where they are scored further on appearance, knowledge and attitude. E-7 through E-9 promotions are boards only; an Army-wide centralized process at Army Personnel Headquarters make the determination from

the soldier's record containing an official photo, education, military training and duty positions; the soldier does not appear at the board. Unless the soldier declines promotion consideration, is unwilling to attend the US Army Sergeant Major Course, or is not commander-recommended, every promotion-eligible soldier's record is reviewed and scored.

Promotion Boards: Unit commanders recommend soldiers at E-4 and E-5 based on standardized criteria of TIS, TIG, education, fitness and lack of disciplinary problems. This recommendation is then validated through monthly boards conducted on strict timelines to ensure promotions execute effectively (Figure 6). The board will process a Memorandum once completed identifying personnel recommended and not recommended (by majority vote) for the commander, and the soldier will then be placed on a promotion list.⁵¹ Centralized boards will convene as needed and soldiers must meet TIS, education and other eligibility requirement specified through the board announcement message for consideration. The Command General will announce the board results and soldiers will be promoted monthly. The Army also provides secondary methods for promotion based on early recommendations and exemplary combat performance.

Figure 6: US Army promotion cycle⁵²

UNIT/SOLDIER PROCESSING		DATA PROCESSING TIME-LAG	DATA PROCESSING		TAG-D PROCESSING		UNIT		PROMOTION EFFECTIVE FOR THOSE ATTAINING ANNOUNCED CUTOFF SCORES																																	
IDENTIFY AND RECOMMEND SOLDIERS FOR PROMOTION BOARD CONDUCT PROMOTION BOARDS (NLT 4TH DAY OF BOARD MONTH) APPROVE BOARD RESULTS (NLT 4TH DAY OF MONTH) ESTABLISH RECOMMENDATION WITH AUTOMATED SYSTEM (NLT 8TH DAY OF MONTH) ENSURE PERSONNEL INFORMATION MANAGEMENT ACCURACY (NLT 10TH DAY OF MONTH)			OML PULL (11TH DAY, 0400 EST) APPLICATION OF MODEL APPROVAL OF PROMOTION ALLOCATIONS		POST CUTOFF SCORES (24TH DAY) BY-NAME LIST ON WEB (24TH DAY)		ENSURE PERSONNEL INFORMATION MANAGEMENT ACCURACY ARRANGE APPROPRIATE CEREMONY																																			
20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1st of following month
MONTHLY CYCLE (DAY OF THE MONTH) - PROCESS																																										

Figure 3-3. Regular Army monthly promotion cycle

Evaluation Form: Three NCO Evaluation Reports will be fielded in September of 2015 (Figure 7). These are separated into Direct Level for E-5 focused on technical proficiency with ratings based on meeting or not meeting performance expectations and a corresponding narrative. Next is the Organizational Level for E-6 through E-8 focused on processes and systems with ratings from “Did not meet,” “Met standard,” “exceeded,” and “Far exceeded;” as well with comment block to explain. Last, Strategic Level is a two-page report with written comments, although promotion potential will be assessed the same as NCOs (Figure 8). Performance criteria will be: Presence, Intellect, Leadership, Development and Achievement; each with its own expectations. Promotion potential is designated between “Not qualified,” “Qualified,” “Highly qualified,” and “Most qualified” (Figure 8). Ranks E-6 and above will be limited to 50% of the soldiers rated by the senior raters. The new NCOER implementation is due to the lack of clear definitions in focus areas and inconsistent ratings.⁵³

Figure 7: DRAFT NCO Evaluation Report⁵⁴

PART IV – PERFORMANCE EVALUATION, PROFESSIONALISM, ATTRIBUTES, AND COMPETENCIES (Rater)			
d. PRESENCE: (Military and professional bearing, Fitness, Confidence, Resilience)		COMMENTS:	
MET STANDARD <input type="checkbox"/>	DID NOT MEET STANDARD <input type="checkbox"/>		
e. INTELLECT: (Mental agility, Sound judgment , Innovation, Interpersonal tact, Expertise)		COMMENTS:	
MET STANDARD <input type="checkbox"/>	DID NOT MEET STANDARD <input type="checkbox"/>		

Figure 8: DRAFT SNCO Evaluation Report⁵⁵

RATER OVERALL PERFORMANCE			
i. This NCO's overall performance is rated as:			
FAR EXCEEDED STANDARD <input type="checkbox"/>	EXCEEDED STANDARD <input type="checkbox"/>	MET STANDARD <input type="checkbox"/>	DID NOT MEET STANDARD <input type="checkbox"/>
j. COMMENTS:			
PART V – SENIOR RATER OVERALL POTENTIAL			
a. Select one box representing Rated NCO's overall potential compared to others in the same grade whom you have rated in your career. I currently senior rate _____ NCOs in this grade.	b. COMMENTS:		
<input type="checkbox"/> MOST QUALIFIED (limited to <50%) <input type="checkbox"/> HIGHLY QUALIFIED <input type="checkbox"/> QUALIFIED <input type="checkbox"/> NOT QUALIFIED			
c. List two successive assignments and one broadening assignment (3-5 years). Successive Assignment: 1) _____ 2) _____	Broadening Assignment: _____		

US Navy

Promotion system: The US Navy promotion system uses a “whole person” concept using knowledge and advancement examinations, job performance, Time in Rate (TIR), and awards towards composite score points. Promotion up to E-2 requires a TIR and a chain of command recommendation and E-3 adds an examination covering duties and naval standards; no promotion limit exists to E-3. Promotions between E-4 through E-6 are based on six factors including TIR, advancement examination scores and awards; E-7 has only an examination and performance requirements used for board ratings. E-4 through E-7 promotion is competitive, but sailors only compete against others in their Rate (job). For promotion to E-8 and E-9 the Navy does not use SNCO examinations; instead an Enlisted Summary Record (ESR) containing previous examination scores, TIR/TIS, assignment history, education and other data are used for board recommendations, but must also have a Commanding Officer (CO) or Officer in Charge (OIC) advancement recommendation. Promotion boards meet in Washington, DC and vary in size, but average toward 75 members. It is separated in panels responsible for specific duty positions, such as medical or engineering. Each panel will then evaluate the Seamen based on education, performance and duty assignments.

Promotion Recommendations: The Navy uses a “soft breakout”, or unit-level stratification, on each of their personnel measured across their organization, providing a basis for the highest “Early Promote” (EP) recommendations, authorized up to 20% of the unit. The Navy pools all personnel at each rate to ensure quota enforcement and use a static closeout date for evaluations, thus all personnel are compared through the same timeframe. Each individual rates between “significant problems” (worst) and “early promote” (best), based on a 1-5 scoring system. The CO/OIC sets a unit average (summary group average) he or she expects all

personnel to meet. Therefore, if the average is set at 3.5 of 5, a significantly higher rating must be justified, the same for lower scores. The CO or OIC will then provide a “recommend” or “not recommend” for the member, the most important eligibility requirement derived from the latest evaluation report.

Evaluation Forms: The Navy uses two evaluation forms – E-1 through E-6 use an Evaluation Report & Counseling Record form, E-7 and above use the Evaluation & Counseling Report.⁵⁶ The member completes the form providing their accomplishments and performance measurements and the supervisor validates the information for commander support (Figure 9). In the example, the commander gave the member an EP rating (as an Individual), and is one of three personnel with that rating (in the Summary) matching the soft breakout in the narrative (Introduction). The sailor has a 4.14 score out of 5 points given, above the commander’s 4.00 Summary Group Average.

Figure 9: US Navy Evaluation and Counseling Record⁵⁷

Total of trait scores divided by number of graded traits.	See Special Programs, Shore Special Programs, Commissioning Programs, Special Warfare Programs, Rating Instructor Duty, Other (Be specific)		<i>+ M (Chief, preschool)</i>		Date: 15Nov02
4.14	RECRUIT CO CDR	COMM PROG	Introduction		PNC
43. COMMENTS ON PERFORMANCE: * All 1.0 marks, three 2.0 marks, and 2 Post must be 10 or 12 Point (10 or 12 point) only. Use upper and lower case.					
Ranked #1 of 3 in Admin Department and #3 of 13 assigned. An absolute must select for Chief Petty Officer.					
<p>-Through his leadership, Admin Department completed a flawless command admin and personnel record inspection. Personnel records management was specifically praised by the COMNAVSURPLANT inspection team. His performance was reflected in his selection as Sailor of the Quarter. Meticulously tracked a \$25,000 TAD budget.</p> <p>-Model appearance, flawless conduct. Scored outstanding on last 3 PRTs.</p> <p>-Has completed 30 semester hours toward an Associate Degree in Management. He provided training for 15 junior personnel on organization and time management procedures. His involvement in training and mentoring junior personnel has resulted in 10 reenlistments and his department maintaining a 80 percent retention rate.</p> <p>-President of the J. P. Jones Elementary School Parent/Teacher Association. He worked 500 hours repairing playground equipment and participating in the reading program.</p> <p>PNI Sample is ready for immediate promotion to PNC. He has the mental toughness and administrative knowledge to be an outstanding Limited Duty Officer and is strongly recommended for a commissioning program.</p>					
44. QUALIFICATIONS/ACHIEVEMENTS - Education, awards, community involvement, etc., during this period. Awarded Navy Achievement Medal (2nd award); awarded COMNAVSURPLANT Letter of Appreciation. SOQ for 2Q, CY 02.					
Promotion Recommendation	NOB	Significant Problems	Progressing	Promotable	Must Promote
45. INDIVIDUAL					X
46. SUMMARY		0	0	5	5
47. Signature of Senior Rater (Typed Name & Grade/Rank). I have reviewed the evaluation of this member. Name, their performance standards and have provided written explanation to support the marks of 1.0 and 5.0.			48. Reporting Senior Address COMMANDER DESRON EIGHT TWO FPO AP 34567-1234		
<i>JR OFFICER, I.R., LT</i>			Signature of Reporting Senior <i>R.R. Gern</i> Date: 15Nov02		
49. Signature of Senior Rater (Typed Name & Grade/Rank). I have reviewed the evaluation of this member. Name, their performance standards and have provided written explanation to support the marks of 1.0 and 5.0.			50. Signature of Reporting Senior <i>R.R. Gern</i> Date: 15Nov02		
			Summary Group Average: 4.00		

Section V: The New Air Force Enlisted Evaluation System

The last major EPR and EES change was 25 years ago and WAPS implementation was 45 years ago proving the system's effectiveness, but inherent problems created enough dissatisfaction among members to force this latest change. In 1947, with the challenges of starting a new Service, a level of dissatisfaction was tolerable and likely expected, but years of the evaluation system's "wild ride" prompted a multitude of letters to congressmen forcing real, not reactive change, producing WAPS. Airmen now use online forums and e-mail as the mediums to vocalize their discontent but the outcomes remained the same, change needed to happen. This dissatisfaction prompted leadership as far back as the mid-2000s to find ways to realign EPR scoring, but the correction required more than commentaries and articles professing, "there is no problem."⁵⁸ Some progress was accomplished in 2012 with the Airman Comprehensive Assessment; although this was significant progress in the right direction, it was too late to fix the thoroughly entrenched "broken" system.

Change isn't always simple or welcome and the announcement in 2013 of a new EPR and EES prompted positive and negative comments openly shared on the Air Force Times webpage forum.⁵⁹ Some perceived potential favoritism and the need to "brown-nose," while others saw it as a way to turn performance into their advantage.⁶⁰ Perceptions will disappear slowly with use but Airmen must make the effort to understand and educate themselves on the EES and its history. The more personnel understand the past and present systems the better they can execute it, which is why the Air Force provided the EES Roadshow, but only a small percentage of the force attended.

The Roadshow, although informative, was still only an overview of the entire system with changes still waiting implementation. The briefers made a specific point to discuss culture

change and the importance of core values and Airmanship, but these are ambiguous terms in relation to the direct provisioning of very few top promotion recommendations. The system creates more competition but standards and processes should provide equality. Although competition executed cooperatively and focused on the mission can be healthy for an organization, if unit members perceive direct competition it can become counterproductive.⁶¹ To maintain a healthy organization, HAF developed the EES to enhance the relationship between subordinate and supervisor, reduce administration, synchronize timelines and keep personnel performance-focused and on task. This evaluation system is based on three pillars – the ACA, Performance Assessment and Promotion Recommendation – to produce a system equitable, explainable and executable.⁶² Leadership, however, is the only thing that will make it effective.⁶³ A description of the key functions will provide better understanding.

Removal of the Change of Reporting Official (CRO) evaluation:

Per AFI 36-2406, this EES removes the CRO evaluation report required when an Airman is transferred after a 120 days of supervision except if the Airman is chosen for a 365-day extended deployment. This accomplishes three things – reduces administrative effort, provides for a single evaluation at the SCOD and removes manipulation of the system. There were 37,000 CRO evaluations accomplished annually wasting a significant amount of time and effort because it was required again at the end of the rating period. Personnel transferring now use the AF Form 77, *Letter of Evaluation*, to provide official documentation when accomplishing the EPR at the SCOD. Having a single EPR annually removes the ability to “help Johnny” by manipulating the system,⁶⁴ reduces potential favoritism, and accounts for all activities by the member, negative and positive. The removal of the CRO is a small change, but should be very welcome.

Static Close-Out Dates (SCOD):

With the removal of multiple CRO-driven evaluations, the Air Force aligned a single annual evaluation date for each rank to provide stability and predictability in the EPR process. The same rating period aligned with the timeframe for each rank creates a fair and equitable evaluation period between peers for promotion recommendations and quota control. Unit-level quota systems were attempted in the past but supervisors often distributed all “5” ratings at the end of the promotion cycle, removing outstanding Airmen from competing if their EPRs closed out after or were not yet promotion-eligible.⁶⁵ If unit leadership held a quota, perceptions of unfairness could arise. Last, the SCOD reduces workload to a single annual evaluation, which coordinates unit planning and requirements. The only significant exception is the Directed-By-Commander (DBC) evaluations for members receiving quality force indicators documenting a negative action, yet still provides a promotion recommendation on the SCOD EPR if the rest of the rating period was outstanding.

Some feel that grouping all EPRs during a single timeframe might overload units,⁶⁶ but it also assists in planning, no different than any unit-wide effort. One factor potentially problematic will be when a member has a PCS within 120 days of the SCOD – if greater than 120, the gaining unit accomplishes the EPR and if less, the losing unit accomplishes it. The problem lies in the lack of directive guidance on how a PCS (or the vulnerability of PCS) will affect fairness in gaining top promotion recommendations. At this point, the Air Force says only that 120 days should make the system as fair and equitable as possible.⁶⁷

Airman Comprehensive Assessment (ACA):

Reducing administration and synchronizing the evaluation schedule places the effort on actual requirements, and the first is expectation management.⁶⁸ This comes in the form of

member requirements and the feedback process, starting with the Airman Comprehensive Feedback. This is the replacement for the feedback system, but programmed to do much more because the ACA redefines the way supervisors communicate expectations to their subordinates, ultimately creating a more effective and consistent relationship. This is very important because the ACA and the relationship it creates will translate directly to the annual evaluation and the Airman's promotion recommendation.

The Air Force provides expectations for every Airman in AFI 36-2618, *The Enlisted Force Structure*, and by using this as a foundation the integration of the ACA into the EPR, promotion recommendations and Forced Distribution makes more sense.⁶⁹ The ACA provides more than work center requirements and annual expectations; it is a platform for development of the subordinate acting as a catalyst to develop objective and transparent leadership. Both supervisor and subordinate are expected to revisit guidance and standards throughout the rating period, creating a consistent, fair and equitable evaluation when the time comes to recommend top performers. As CMSAF Cody said, there should be “no surprise” when the ratings are accomplished.⁷⁰

The Enlisted Performance Report

The Evaluation Report changed through the decades adjusting to quota problems, rating score changes or institutional changes;⁷¹ but it formally documents actions and compliance of Airmen. The EPR builds a career-long resume, documents performance, develops a point of reference between the member and their supervisor, and more. When accuracy is absent, which is what happened with the inflation, the report loses effectiveness. Airmen's chief complaint about the recent EPR was, “everyone gets a 5,” reducing the emphasis on performance toward WAPS points; the new EPR addresses both issues. The “whole Airman” concept is still used,

but the focus is Airman performance derived from the ACA in relation to AFI 36-2618, and interactions between supervisor and subordinate.⁷² Rating how Airmen follow core values, personally improve and promote camaraderie while growing within the Air Force in support of the unit's mission is the intent. For SNCOs, the adjusted emphasis is toward the effort invested in growing those very same Airmen.

With performance as the foundation, Airman ratings were adjusted to provide a more objective process. First it was aligned with the ACA to ensure the feedback process has validity in the evaluation. Second, expectation values replaced number scores; the low range previously was "Poor," or "1," it is now "Met some but not all expectations;" the high was "Truly Among the Best," or "5," now changed to "Exceeded most, if not all expectations" (Figure 10). The member is rated on their accomplishments and actions against the expectations of the supervisor, and this translates into the promotion recommendation compared to his or her peers based on the Promotion Eligibility Cutoff Date (PECD) and SCOD, and ultimately provides the WAPS point distribution.

Figure 10: New EPR Ratings⁷³

III. PERFORMANCE IN PRIMARY DUTIES/TRAINING REQUIREMENTS (Using AFI 36-2618. The Enlisted Force Structure, as the standard of performance expectations commensurate with the ratee's rank, access to what degree the ratee complied with the following performance expectations.)				
1. Task Knowledge/Proficiency: Consider the quality, quantity, results, and impact of the Airman's knowledge and ability to accomplish tasks. Initiative/Motivation: Describes the degree of willingness to execute duties, motivate colleagues and develop innovative new processes. Skill Level Upgrade Training: Consider skill level awarding course, CDC timeliness completion, course exam results, and completion of core task training. Duty Position Requirements, qualifications, and certifications: Consider duty position qualifications, career field certifications (if applicable), and readiness requirements. Training of Others: Consider the impact the Airman made to train others.				
Not-Rated <input type="checkbox"/>	Met some but not all expectations (few Airmen) <input type="checkbox"/>	Met all expectations (Majority of Airmen) <input type="checkbox"/>	Exceeded some, but not all expectations (some Airmen) <input type="checkbox"/>	Exceeded most, if not all expectations (very few Airmen) <input type="checkbox"/>
2. COMMENTS (Minimum 1 line, but limited to 6 lines)				

The change from a number score to expectation-driven assessment removes the perception of (and hopefully actual) rating subjectivity, which is very important because this

rating means significantly more than before – a limited number of commander’s promotion recommendation based on Forced Distribution or Restricted Senior Rater Endorsement percentages. This gives the outstanding performers the advantage they deserve by creating a system where performance means something. The new EPR also incorporates a minimum acceptable number of performance bullets so anything seen as “fluff” or “filling white space,” according the Air Force leadership, should actually reduce the effectiveness of the EPR.⁷⁴ Fewer, performance-related bullets should actually create a stronger EPR and is acceptable especially if the Airman is not promotion-eligible. The removal of multiple evaluations during the year and reduction in required bullets should allow supervisors and Airmen a better foundation for the assessment and advertisement of their performance.

Promotion Recommendation:

If all processes work appropriately the EPR rating is then translated into the promotion recommendation from the commander, which applies to the WAPS scoring model toward a composite score. The EPR is compared to his or her peers across the organization by rank at the SCOD to determine the most deserving Airmen for the top recommendations. A “Promote” (P), “Must Promote” (MP) or “Promote Now” (PN) will create a difference in WAPS points of 200, 220 and 250 respectively. If the recommendation is “Do Not Promote” (DNP), “Not Ready Now” (NRN) or contains referral comments, the member is ineligible for promotion. Eligible personnel receive a maximum of 250 WAPS EPR points based on the last three promotion-eligible EPRs (Figure 11). The first year of eligibility provides 100% of the EPR promotion recommendation points; the second year is 60/40%; and the third year is 50/30/20% respectively (Figure 12). In short, the most important time to have a PN awarding 250 EPR points is on the first year of eligibility because the Airman’s WAPS points come from that single EPR. The new

system bases these EPR ratings on the expectations throughout the rating period between a supervisor and subordinates, resulting in fair and equitable treatment.

Figure 11: Forced Distribution by rank⁷⁵

Forced Distribution Promotion Recommendation Limits (By Rank)					
Ratings	Do Not Promote (DNP)	Not Ready Now (NRN)	Promote (P)	Must Promote (MP)	Promote Now (PN)
Points	50	150	200	220	250
SrA	No Restriction	No Restriction	No Restriction	15%	5%
SSgt	No Restriction	No Restriction	No Restriction	10%	5%
TSgt	No Restriction	No Restriction	No Restriction	10%	5%

Figure 12: EPR Promotion Recommendation Distribution⁷⁶

Percent of Total Possible Score			
# of EPRs	1st EPR	2nd EPR	3rd EPR
1	100%		
2	60%	40%	
3	50%	30%	20%

Challenges with provisioning promotion recommendations will likely appear when comparing AFSCs because the recommendation basis is only on rank. The ability to look beyond the different types of performance between operations, support or administration is paramount and unit leadership must develop sound practices to rate their personnel. A team effort ensures the most deserving Airmen, regardless of AFSC, are recommended.

Forced Distribution and Restricted Senior Rater Endorsement:

The concept of Forced Distribution needs explanation to understand the relationship between the EPR and the provisioning of the top commander's promotion recommendation. This is the process that directly addresses EPR inflation by controlling the number of MP and PN ratings a commander can give; the concept is simple. The percentage basis comes from the number of promotion-eligible personnel the commander has in the promotion cycle. Units are

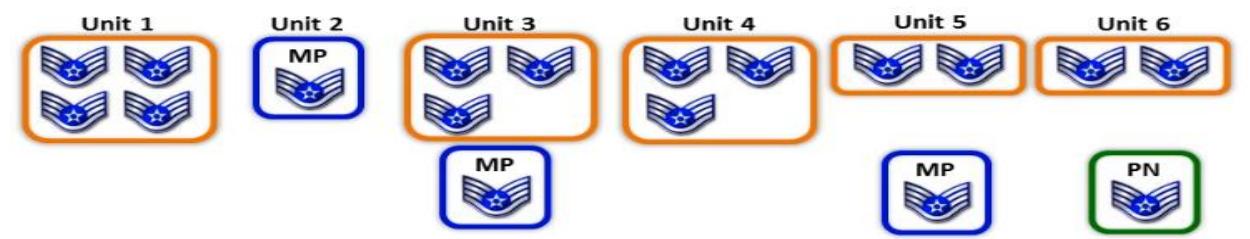
divided into small (10 and fewer promotion-eligible personnel) and large units (11 or more promotion-eligible personnel). The allocation for PN is 5% of the SrA to TSgt pool; MP is 15% of the SrA and 10% of the SSgt/TSgt pool, allowing only the top 15-20% of the promotion-eligible NCOs a top promotion recommendation (Figure 11). As an example, a unit with 16 promotion-eligible Staff Sergeants (SSgt) gains one MP and one PN (Figure 13), and a unit with 30 eligible members gains two MPs and three PNs. Units with less than 11 eligible personnel are compiled under a Senior Rater's Enlisted Forced Distribution Panel (EFDP). For example, an aggregated number of 18 promotion-eligible personnel are allocated one PN and three MP. The members compete against personnel from other small units under the same Senior Rater Pool (Figure 14).

Figure 13: Top Recommendation Distribution at Large Unit⁷⁷



Figure 14: Top Recommendation Distribution at Small Unit⁷⁸

Small Unit eligibles who do not receive a **Promote Now -or- Must Promote at the EFDP, return to unit level for award of **Promote****



Some may feel this process will hurt promotions or give some AFSCs an advantage, but in actuality gives the most productive personnel the advantage they deserve for their outstanding performance. Besides those top-rated personnel, the 80-85% of promotion-eligible force will essentially compete under the previous system's conditions (a "5" is now a "3"), and although the promotion recommendations are allocated by rank, enlisted promotions are still provisioned by AFSC. This means that no matter which AFSC gets the recommendations, the same number of promotions per AFSC will not change. The average number of NCO promotions is 40%; therefore, even those with a P will have sufficient capability to promote.⁷⁹

Restricted Senior Rater Endorsement (SRE) is the new stratification process used to differentiate promotion recommendations for eligible E-7 and E-8s. Like Forced Distribution, the stratifications go to the top performing E-7s (10%) and E-8s (20%) for promotion recommendation within the Senior Rater's candidate pool. Unlike Forced Distribution, this does not correlate into EPR points because board scores eventually replace the EPR points in final WAPS calculations. What the SRE does is restrict the "Firewall 5s" and gives the board more understanding of the member's performance for scoring. Like Forced Distribution, this gives those who stand out within their organization a deserved promotion advantage, but does not guarantee promotion. If a SNCO is stratified, but fails to meet minimum test scores he or she will not proceed in the promotion process.

WAPS processes and scoring:

The final aspect to the new EES is the significantly changed WAPS scoring model. Since TOPCAP, the scoring model stayed much the same but as the emphasis of the new system is Airman performance, many things needed realignment. First, knowledge test scores remain the same at 100 points but require a minimum passing score for each and composite score for both.

Airman must get at least 40 points on either test, but need a composite score of 90 for both (40 and 50 points respectively); E-6s testing for E-7 require a minimum of 60 on each. If testing PFE-only, he or she must score a minimum of 45 points, which is then doubled to equal the minimum 90. EPR points based on Forced Distribution factors increased from 135 points to 250 points maximum. Board scores total a maximum of 450 points and promotion-eligible E-6s now undergo two promotion phases: Phase I ensures they pass knowledge tests and other minimum criteria and then Phase II executes boards mirroring the SNCO process (Figure 15 and 16). TIS and TIG scores are reduced with the potential to be completely phased out.

Figure 15: WAPS Point Scoring Model⁸⁰

Weighted Factors for Promotion to SSgt thru MSgt	Current Maximum Score	CY15 Maximum Score
SKT	100	100
PFE	100	100
Decorations	25	25
EPRs	135	250 (up to last 3 TIG eligible only EPRS) 450 board score for E-6 to MSgt
TIS	40	26
TIG	60	40

Figure 16: SNCO WAPS Point Scoring Model⁸¹

Weighted Factors for Promotion to SMSgt thru CMSgt	Current Maximum Score	CY15 Maximum Score
USAFSE	100	100
Decorations	25	25
TIS	25	16
TIG	60	40

One Airman will look at the new scoring model as a hindrance to promotion while another will see it as a challenge. If performance matches expectations it will be noticeable from the highest level to the lowest, thus Airmen and supervisors must have a relationship with a priority placed on performance, transparency and objectivity. CMSgt Petzel of the Enlisted Force Policy Branch said, “This will take bold leadership.”⁸² In addition, it requires effective and consistent leadership.

Section VI: Recommendations

This research proposes these recommendations to reduce potential immediate problems and increase the longevity of the expected outcomes. A comparison of the continual changes developing WAPS, Sister-service processes and Airmen's concerns vocalized through on-line forums or the AF Roadshow FAQs ground these recommendations.

Maintain consistency: The EES Roadshow specified the concepts of equitable, explainable and executable in this EES. The Air Force directs many processes, such as limiting promotion recommendations, adjusting WAPS scores and aligning SCODs; however, other functions and processes have been left to faith and confidence.⁸³ Not every facet of the system requires direction, but if the Air Force meets a member's concern with an answer not equitable, explainable or executable further research may be required to ensure loopholes do not exist. Airmen are very knowledgeable on unit-level issues and inequities, and the questions highlighted during the EES Roadshow Frequently Asked Questions or on-line forums are effective starting points to decide if Air Force-level direction is required – transferring near SCODs, standardized stratification criteria, inflated bullets affecting promotion recommendations – are a small sample. Where the new EES lacks a tangible process, there exists a high probability of gaps relating to loopholes, favoritism or subjectivity. If it affects the member's promotion, faith should not be a course of action.

Rater Training: At the risk of following the “rabbit hole” of implementation issues or being too late, training and guidance requires evaluation. This new EES will have immediate effects on every enlisted member, but the lack of understanding and last minute guidance gives a perception of ready, shoot, aim. For the ACA and EPR, the Air Force expects all supervisors to use AFI 36-2618 as a standard measure, but little else has been provided for execution and

documentation. Whether this documentation is in PME or a guidebook (a commander's handbook is said to be coming),⁸⁴ putting in place a comprehensive formal training program is high on the priority list. As an example, the Marine Corps studied their officer promotion system to look for inflation of performance reports and promotion recommendations. The study found inflation was not a significant problem, but raters needed more effective training. The ability to grow into a position while performing effectively in their duties varies by person and experience, but those they rate are affected the entire time.⁸⁵ The Army is implementing a new NCO Evaluation Report (NCOER) and sent out training teams while providing on-line step-by-step instructions.⁸⁶ The earlier the Air Force can bring raters to the execution level expected, the more effective the new EES is for the personnel they support while reducing unintended actions.

Promoting Mentorship: The Air Force gave the Mentorship Program a new form with the MyVector Air Force Portal application. In a letter describing the participation opportunity, the Secretary of the Air Force said, "...anyone in a leadership or supervisory position should participate and actively recruit both mentees and mentors."⁸⁷ Mentorship is more than just an opportunity and should be actively encouraged because it affects personnel at every level both personally and professionally. The Air Force pinpointed the lack of effective relationships between supervisors and subordinates as a leading cause of problems in the previous EES, promoting the ACA to be labeled the cornerstone of the new EES. More importantly, as the Air Force Mentorship Program is a Service-wide initiative, these skills should transfer between organizations. The earlier Airmen participate, the more effective the program is for mentors and mentees, increasing familiarization with the concepts as they develop, promote and move assignments.

Promotion recommendations for transferring personnel: The Air Force should develop a process to remove the possibility of unfairness when a promotion-eligible member transfers to or from a unit on or near the SCOD, as the PCS will likely become a factor in the promotion recommendation. The 120-day EPR requirement is expected to ensure forced distribution and restricted senior rater endorsement processes are as fair and equitable as possible.⁸⁸ This does not obligate either unit, losing or gaining, to give a top promotion recommendation to a deserving Airman. A losing unit will not benefit from the member's promotion and the gaining unit has no history of the Airman. There is a possibility of marginalizing high-performing Airmen who PCS after the SCOD in two promotion cycles where a losing unit does not want to provide the recommendation to a departing member and a gaining unit seeing only a partial year of performance.

If Airmen see inequities, here are three possible suggestions. One, a static PCS-date based on the SCOD for promotion-eligible personnel. Two, removing PCS knowledge from the selection process, such as blind recommendation boards where all member information is removed allowing only an Airman's performance assessment. Three, HAF, MAJCOM or Wing-owned promotion recommendation billets that remove the member from unit manning pools giving them an unbiased comparison. Each possibility has strengths and weaknesses, but are explainable and executable processes.

Promotion recommendation equality: The Air Force must remove the perception of unit-level board inequality in an objective way. This was one reason the Air Force developed WAPS in 1968, and without a new standard Airmen could perceive subjectivity and favoritism in the new EES. AFI 36-2406, paragraph 1.4.2.3, states evaluations are required to be a matter of record,⁸⁹ expected by leadership to force equality, but this cannot be assumed. The lack of an

Air Force standard is a concern to Airmen and at this time is not explained. AFI 36-2406, paragraph 1.12.1.6.6 allows stratification statements only on an E-7 and E-8 EPR but a mechanism establishing peer ranking below E-7 must be developed for transparency.

The AF Form 77 and ACA might provide the ranking transparency needed. The USMC uses what they call a ‘brag sheet’ Marines informally place accomplishments throughout the year. The navy uses a ‘soft breakout’ (stratification) on their evaluations showing Sailors their rank in relation to their peers. The Air Force could use the LOE and ACA to provide both when accomplishing the promotion recommendations. The LOE can be used as an addendum to the ACA the way the USMC uses a “brag sheet” for feedback follow-up documentation. The supervisor updates the LOE throughout the year in coordination with feedback sessions. If the member PCSs it is nearly complete, and if he or she stays it can be used to accomplish the EPR. In coordination, a supervisor stratification block can be added to the ACA and used like the Navy’s “soft breakout.” The new EES relies on supervisors being clear, accurate and honest in their assessment,⁹⁰and this provides an official way to openly provide transparency to each member while maintaining expectations when promotion recommendations are given.

EPR writing standardization: The strength of performance bullets often relied on the supervisor’s EPR writing experience or time invested into the EPR, yet still often required changes to meet individual unit leadership’s requirements. EPRs were inflated with adjectives, accumulation of data, influence and other factors. Implementing the new EPRs provides the Air Force a chance to reset EPR criteria and provide Service standards allowing equal comparison. Writing in plain language rather than bullets, eliminating buzzwords and keeping accomplishments realistic would help remove EPR writing “skill” requirements and reduce inflation.

Section VII: Conclusions

This research used a review of current EES problems, a history of implementation, a comparison with Sister-services, and an overview of key changes to provide an understanding of the new Enlisted Evaluation System's strengths and weaknesses. This was used to provide recommendations to support the effective and long-term functions of this new EES.

Strengths recognized through the research are the implementation of the SCOD, removal of the CRO evaluation and change from numbered ratings to expectation-driven performance. Placing emphasis on performance created a significant positive change requiring time to fully understand and execute because the definition of performance will be different between AFSCs, but it aligns personnel on the need to place their performance effort on the job, not community service. The Forced Distribution and Senior Rater Endorsement directly addresses the “Firewall 5s” and provides promotion advantage to those deemed most deserving. Experience and time with the new system will ensure quota percentages are correct, but the concepts all seem very sound with positive desired outcomes.

Weaknesses are seen in a lack of direction and inconsistent thought. The ACA was tested at multiple bases for two years before full implementation; WAPS took two years, as well. In comparison, the new EES although in development since at least 2013, seems implemented in an almost On-The-Job Training fashion. This creates concerns based on potential interpretation by unit leadership that may be different from Air Force expectations. The Air Force desires an equitable, explainable and executable EES but there are processes not meeting these descriptions, as seen in the EES Roadshow FAQs and on-line forums. Just as the EES history has seen problems such as EPR inflation resurface, or actions such as community service become rebranded, problems produced by lack of attention may exacerbate beyond repair.

The quota systems through the first few decades reduced manning and promotions, but dissatisfaction was a consistent result; Forced Distribution and the Restricted Senior Rater Endorsement are essentially the same with a different purpose, thus the Air Force should expect a level of dissatisfaction. The inflation of EPR ratings reemerged many times requiring system adjustments and, as the inflation of the EPR has not been fixed (only the outcomes), problems with stratification will probably emerge. Service-wide processes cannot contain ambiguities without the potential of interpretations not following Air Force expectations. Ensuring standards will prevent these problems.

The Air Force took a bold step in the comprehensiveness of this system and all Airmen should be excited to be part of the implementation; the effectiveness and longevity depends on everyone taking an active role in its success.

Endnotes

All notes appear in shortened form. For full details, see the appropriate entry in the bibliography

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⁴ Air Force Headquarters, "The New EES Roadshow."

⁵ Ibid

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⁷ Hoffman, "This is the KC-46 of Promotions."

⁸ WAPS Calculator

⁹ Air Force Writer, "How to Write an EPR," <http://www.airforcewriter.com/bulletst.htm>.

¹⁰ Air Force Writer, "The EPR Code," <http://www.airforcewriter.com/secret.htm>.

¹¹ Grill, "Air Force Assessing Feedback."

¹² Atkins to MAJCOM, memorandum

¹³ "Air Force Roadshow Brief, " MyPers Portal, 6

¹⁴ Lyle, "Officials Modernize Mentoring Program."

¹⁵ AFI 36-2643, *Air Force Mentorship*, 19

¹⁶ NAVMC Directive 1500.58, *Marine Corps Mentoring Program*, 149

¹⁷ United States Army (USA), *US Army Mentorship Handbook*, 39

¹⁸ Lyle, "Officials Modernize Mentoring Program."

¹⁹ Losey, "Volunteering won't help you get promoted."

²⁰ Halvorson, "Whole-person Is More Than Volunteering!"

²¹ Larter, "NCOs Put Meaning in EPR."

²² AFI 36-2406, *Officer and Enlisted Evaluations*, 101

²³ Air Force Writer, "The EPR Code," <http://www.airforcewriter.com/secret.htm>.

²⁴ Schiefer, *WAPS – Standardizing Test Scores*, 39.

²⁵ Browning, "Is Performance Reporting Inflated?"

²⁶ TSgt Eric Sanchez (USAF Det 2, 66 TRS Commander Support), interview by author, 25 September 2015.

²⁷ Military Times Forum, Chief_KO comment on CRO, 09-17-2013, (03:29 AM)

²⁸ Jordan, "New Enlisted Promotion System Detailed."

²⁹ Larter, "NCOs Put Meaning in EPR."

³⁰ Losey, "Some Skeptical of New Promotion System."

³¹ Bednarek, *The Enlisted Experience*, 9.

³² Hall, *Perspective of AF Enlisted Promotion, 1947-1980*, 19.

³³ Bednarek, *The Enlisted Experience*, 9.

³⁴ Kutelski, "Promote the Best With the Best System," 2.

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³⁸ AFR 39-29, 1967, *Promotion of Airmen*, in Hall, 41

³⁹ Congress, *Promotion Policy Review*, in Hall, 50

⁴⁰ Kopyay, *Field Test of Weighted Airman Promotion System*, 8.

⁴¹ Kopyay, *Extension of Weighted Airman Promotion System*, 10.

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⁴⁵ Schiefer, *WAPS – Standardizing Test Scores*, 3.

⁴⁶ Williamson, *Description of Enlisted Promotion Systems*, 25.

⁴⁷ GySgt Carl Harris (USMC, Naval Aviation Schools Command), interview by the author, 10 September 2015.

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⁵² Ibid, 32.

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⁷⁵ Ibid

⁷⁶ “Air Force Roadshow Brief, “ MyPers Portal, 30

⁷⁷ Ibid, 32

⁷⁸ Ibid, 39

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⁸⁵ Clemens, *Evaluation of Fitness Report for Marine Officers*, 21.

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